UNITED
NATIONS

E

Economic and Social Council

Distr.
GENERAL

E/CN.17/1997/2/Add.27
23 January 1997

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

COMMISSION ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT
Fifth session
7-25 April 1997

Overall progress achieved since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development

Report of the Secretary-General

Addendum

National mechanisms and international cooperation for capacity-building in developing countries*

(Chapter 37 of Agenda 21)

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* The present report was prepared by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) as task manager for chapter 37 of Agenda 21, in accordance with arrangements agreed to by the Inter-Agency Committee on Sustainable Development (IACSD). It is the result of consultation and information exchange between United Nations agencies, international and national organizations, interested government agencies and a range of other institutions, individuals and major group representatives.

97-01931 (E) 120297

INTRODUCTION

1. The present report reviews progress made in the implementation of the objectives set out in chapter 37 of Agenda 21 (National mechanisms and international cooperation for capacity-building in developing countries),[1] taking into account the decisions taken by the Commission on Sustainable Development on this subject in 1994 and 1996 at its second and fourth sessions respectively.

2. A first report on capacity-building was submitted to the Commission on Sustainable Development in spring 1994 and a second (E/CN.17/1996/15) two years later in 1996. This report is the third in the series and sums up the major trends and achievements to date in capacity development since 1992.

3. It is important to have a sense of perspective in analysing the overall impact of Agenda 21 with respect to capacity-building. Many of the trends highlighted in this report reflect long-term shifts in approaches to capacity-building, which started well before the Rio Conference. These trends will continue to influence and shape capacity development well into the twenty-first century. The strategic directions of Agenda 21 were thus as much a reflection of the continuing trends as they were a cause. As such, while assessing chapter 37 one must bear in mind that Agenda 21 was only one of many factors influencing donor and country decision makers. One of the main lessons of experience in capacity development has been the realization of the importance of patience, persistence, a shared vision and a long-term horizon when it comes to developing sustainable capacities. The five-year period covered by this report thus represents an important stretch of time, albeit only a small segment in a much broader process.

4. In general, the present report is more positive than its predecessors in 1994 and 1996. While enormous challenges still remain with respect to the implementation of Agenda 21, contributors to this report both from within the United Nations system and from non-governmental organizations pointed to developments on a number of fronts that indicate some genuine progress in selected areas of capacity-building since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development. This more positive prognosis applies both to specific issues such as strategies and participation and to certain regions of the world such as Latin America and the Caribbean.

I. SELECTING KEY OBJECTIVES

5. Agenda 21 defines capacity development as the process and means through which national Governments and local communities develop the necessary skills and expertise to manage their environment and natural resources in a sustainable manner within their daily activities. To promote it, chapter 37 of Agenda 21 emphasizes the following main themes:

(a) A cross-sectoral, multidisciplinary approach to planning and implementation;

(b) Improved capabilities in both the public and private sectors;

(c) Optimum use of national (as opposed to expatriate) human and organizational resources;

(d) Reorientation and coordination of external support for sustainable development;

(d) Better integration of environment protection, economic development and social equity in the development of capacities at the local, regional, national and international levels.

II. REPORTING ON AND ANALYSING SUCCESS

6. Briefly, almost all the capacity-building initiatives supporting the themes mentioned in Agenda 21 can be grouped into eight main areas - environmental strategy and policy, macroeconomic strategy, consensus-building, environmental management capacity, normative and legal frameworks, scientific and socioeconomic research, technology transfer and public outreach. The main advances in the last five years have been in the first three areas. Slower progress is evident in the remainder. More specifically, the more successful activities can be briefly described as follows.

7. Capacity-building for sustainable strategy and policy, particularly the design of national plans and strategies for conservation and the environment, has been the most identifiable success of the post-United Nations Conference on Environment and Development years. Countries ranging from China to Swaziland have put in place the processes to produce Agenda 21 strategies, national conservation strategies and environmental action plans with help from organizations such as the World Bank, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the World Conservation Union (IUCN) and bilateral donors. Over 40 African countries today have some sort of coordinating mechanisms to produce such plans.

8. Many of the lessons of experience coming out of these planning exercises have been captured and synthesized for wider use by the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), the Capacity 21 programme of UNDP and the World Resources Institute. Environmental considerations are also finding their way into macroeconomic strategy. Capacity-building programmes in India, Costa Rica and the Gambia have brought "green accounting" methods into their national policy- and decision-making processes. Capacity 21 programmes in China, Malawi and the United Republic of Tanzania are supporting the efforts of their respective planning bodies to incorporate sustainable development principles into their overall planning procedures.

9. In the past few months, over 30 Governments have asked the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) for assistance in planning and implementing more integrated approaches to all aspects of land-use resources and management. At the city level, efforts are being made to deal more comprehensively with the overlapping issues of air, health, water and waste, and these efforts need to be enhanced.

10. The emphasis in Agenda 21 on consensus-building and more participatory approaches to sustainable development has influenced a new generation of capacity-building projects since 1992. Most activities aimed at environmental management and sustainable development now make explicit efforts to effect stakeholder and beneficiary assessment. The trends towards decentralization and privatization are reinforcing the need for greater inclusion.

11. In Bolivia, for example, Capacity 21 supported a process that included community consultations, and subregional and regional meetings leading to a national convention on the implementation of Bolivia's Agenda 21 in 1996. A participatory process has been used in the Philippines to involve a wide range of national interest groups. The Sustainable Cities Programme, a joint United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat)/United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) programme to strengthen local environmental management capacities, has mobilized the support of close to 30 multi- and bilateral institutions across four continents. Demonstration activities are under way in 20 cities, and the programme is now supporting a network for the sharing of know-how in Environmental Planning and Management in over 70 cities around the world; and both donors and partner Governments are making efforts to increase the "demand" on organizations providing services by making performance standards more transparent. More information is also being provided to public groups through commercial radio and television, publications and newspapers.

12. Agenda 21 has been catalytic for identifying a new role for government in the pursuit of sustainable development. In most countries, national and international non-governmental organizations, community-based organizations and the private sector now help carry out functions that were seen previously as exclusively a state responsibility. New forms of environmental management and service delivery are now emerging. Government-non-governmental organizations and government-private sector partnerships are now much more in evidence and these trends have been encouraged through the outside support of programmes such as Capacity 21 and the Global Environment Facility. To cite one example, the Department for Development Support and Management Services of the United Nations Secretariat recently hosted a symposium (May 1996) in New York under the title "Corporations, Communities and Sustainable Development". Leading mining companies, representatives of Governments, and national and international non-governmental organizations attended and discussed a variety of issues of concern to the private sector including legal protection, investment guarantees, incentives and a favourable environment for financing. More efforts are also under way to develop the capacity of indigenous groups. The UNDP-sponsored study "Conserving indigenous knowledge: Integrating two systems of innovation" was an important step in that process.

III. PROMISING CHANGES

13. The five years since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development have witnessed a rapid growth in regional collaboration. This now takes a variety of forms including international agreements, information exchanges and technical cooperation of various kinds. The need and desire for more regional cooperation can be seen in examples such as the Regional Centre for Services in Surveying, Mapping and Remote Sensing in Eastern and Southern

Africa, the Mediterranean Technical Assistance Programme (METAP) and a number of river basin management programmes in Latin America.

14. Other examples are the Sustainable Cities Programme, the Africa 2000 programme on water supply and sanitation which emphasizes community management of services and the Network for Cooperation in Integrated Water Resource Management for Sustainable Development in Latin America and the Caribbean. In Africa, there is now an African network of environmental impact assessment experts and a growing number of connections among environmental centres both in government and in universities. The Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) is also investing in a compilation of best practice in capacity-building ("best practice studies in capacity-building") in support of the ECA framework agenda for Agenda 21. The Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) and UNEP are cooperating on a joint project on strengthening environmental management capabilities in Eastern and Central Europe. Moreover, the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), UNDP and the Asian Development Bank are collaborating on a Regional Action Programme for Environmentally Sound and Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific 1996-2000. This greater acceptance of collaborative behaviour across national borders should facilitate capacity-building to deal with merging global issues such as climate change, desertification and ozone depletion.

15. Since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, there has been a rapid growth in demand by developing countries and countries with economies in transition for financial and technical support to projects and activities related to environment and development and the goals of Agenda 21. Accordingly, the overall number of technical cooperation and advisory services rendered in this area has increased substantially.

16. The assistance provided by the operational and funding organizations in response to these demands has thus become more focused at the country level where responsibility for action leading to concrete results is considered essential. For instance, best practice initiatives and "model projects" in sustainable development have been more widely developed and encouraged. The criteria used for the selection of these projects include (a) response to a real need of the country; (b) demonstration of significant economic, social or environmental impact for the end-user; (c) demonstration of governmental commitment and the infrastructure necessary for project success and sustainability.

17. There is growing evidence of a much more systematic and strategic approach to capacity-building in many countries. In the past, both donors and partner Governments saw capacity-building as the inevitable result of technical assistance or training or the outcome of the formulation of improved policies. This did not happen. Much of the work in support of Agenda 21 has reinforced the need for participants to focus more directly on capacity-building as a "strategic development umbrella" in the words of the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF); and there also is emerging a more complex view of capacity-building itself which includes a more system-wide approach having to do with stakeholders, the supply and demand for better performance, better incentives, information and civic involvement.

18. Over the past year, the World Bank has encouraged a network of African participants to come up with a more systematic, demand-driven approach that the Bank can support. Similarly, ECA has devised "A Framework for Building and Utilizing Critical Capacities in Africa" that Governments and non-State participants can use to guide their activities. This initiative led in turn to a programme called "Management of Development: National Capacity Strengthening" at the International Training Centre of the International Labour Organization (ILO), Turin, in which 35 country teams and 222 participants have participated. The scope of capacity-building has also extended beyond the organizational level. The UNEP/UNDP Environmental Law Programme assists seven African countries in developing their legal capacities for effective environmental management.

19. The design of donor technical assistance has improved over the past five years. Much greater attention is now paid to issues having to do with the creation, or at least the enhancement, of a sustainable institutional legacy. Less reliance is now placed on the use of expatriate advisers and more on national expertise. Much more attention is now paid to national commitment and ownership, to enlisting stakeholder and beneficiary support and to maintaining a national coalition of support that can energize a programme. Environmental projects now put less emphasis on the transfer of technical expertise and feature a greater focus on the human, institutional and social aspects of sustainable development. Part of the impetus for these reforms has come from the general dissatisfaction within the donor community concerning the outcomes of their programmes; but part of such impetus has also come out of the Agenda 21 experience.

20. There is a growing number of countries that are implementing Agenda 21 with courage and foresight. Costa Rica, for example, has embarked on "irreversible steps" to promote sustainable development. The Philippines is intent on becoming one of the first of the "green tigers" of Asia. Much of this activity signals an emerging determination in different parts of the world to move ahead on Agenda 21 through capacity-building, with or without external support.

21. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC) has debated the ideal process for the development of environmental strategies, and more recently has extended those principles to encompass the development of strategies for sustainable development. DAC stresses that the value of a strategy lies not only in the quality of any documents that may be produced; in fact, it lies principally in the process by which the strategy is prepared. Thus, full participation of all involved stakeholders is necessary. Strategy development is neither static nor linear, but consists of proposals and ideas being constantly tested, and the results of testing feeding back into revisions of the strategy. Thus, the process lies at the heart of the strategy, and any documents that are produced become tools or information materials. This contrasts sharply with the traditional planning approach, in which specialists work to prepare a planning document that is then the medium-term or permanent basis for action.

22. Capacity 21 has applied similar principles in helping countries to develop their national mechanisms for sustainable development. Capacity 21 programmes have taken integration, participation and information as key components of

Agenda 21 strategies. Integration of sectors ensures true multisectoral planning. Participation ensures that the evolving strategy is of the highest quality and has the support of those who will apply it. Access to information empowers societies to make good strategies. After over three years of Capacity 21 implementation, there is no uniform definition of what exactly constitutes a strategy for sustainable development. Some countries (China, the Philippines, Bolivia) have prepared national Agenda 21 documents. Others (for example, Malawi, Nepal, the Gambia) have built upon existing national environmental plans to erect broad programmes that tackle the challenges of Agenda 21. They are attempting to place environment in its proper place within development. All Capacity 21 countries have based their processes on existing plans, strategies, conventions and so forth, and all regard the final strategy as a coordinating objective-setting tool. In every case, the process of preparing the strategy lies at the heart of the exercise.

23. As of May 1996, total contributions to Capacity 21 stood at about $57.0 million. Since 1993, the programme has helped to fund programmes and projects in over 40 countries. It has designed a monitoring and reporting strategy that has been published and widely disseminated, and it has circulated information and lessons on capacity-building for sustainable development through publications, workshops and through the World Wide Web.

24. Progress is being made on the development on a number of operational tools to assist Governments and other non-State actors. Examples include the conservation capacity-building (CCB) process of WWF which looks to include "ground mapping" - a comprehensive capacity needs assessment - as an integral part of programme design. FAO and UNEP have devised new techniques for land-use planning which are now being disseminated through a series of workshops. A growing range of applied process management tools are emerging out of programmes such as the Sustainable Cities Programme. The Committee on Environmental Policy (ECE) has devised country environmental performance reviews (for example for Poland, Bulgaria and Belarus) that look at capacity-building at all levels including national plans and policies, legislation, compliance and monitoring. Furthermore, most countries are beginning to adopt or design information systems to support environmental management.

25. One of the main factors likely to shape capacity-building efforts in the years ahead is the global information management and communications revolution. Indeed, its impact has begun to be felt in ways not foreseen in Agenda 21. The Sustainable Development Networking Programme (SDNP) managed by UNDP, which now connects almost 30 countries around the world, has the potential to reach 65 by late 1997. The free exchange of information and best practice over global electronic networks such as the Internet is enhancing national and regional cooperation, for example, in river basin management. The UNDP Web site now features models and capacity-building frameworks such as CAPBUILD.

26. Teacher-training and computer-aided teaching approaches having to do with environmental management are now more freely available, and the access to technical information through computer networks will likely reshape the current delivery systems for conventional technical assistance that have proved so costly in the 1980s and 1990s. A number of efforts are currently under way to extend the coverage of computer networks to areas of the developing world, such

as Africa, Central America and South Asia, that have lagged behind. The Network for Environment and Sustainable Development in Africa (NESDA), for example, has designed a programme to assist in African countries acquiring access to the Internet, with five countries having joined in the last few months and five more scheduled to join before the end of 1996.

27. Another example of a revolution in communications is in the area of air traffic control. The existing global communication, navigation, surveillance/air traffic management (CNS/ATM) is undergoing a rapid transformation led by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO). Assistance to capacity-building in this regard, provided at subregional and regional levels, is expected to result in increased efficiency in operations while also enhancing environmental benefits.

IV. UNFULFILLED EXPECTATIONS

28. The encouraging trends mentioned above are evidently only a part of the broader picture of capacity-building since the Rio conference. It remains true that, for the most part, the solutions to the technical problems having to do with sustainable development are well known. What is lacking is the development of the social and institutional structures that are needed to keep pace with the policy, regulatory and service demands arising from rapid population growth, increased complexity and the changes in technology; and underlying this gap is the issue of good governance and its impact on building capacities and developing performance standards for sustainable development.

29. As pointed out in this report, much of the progress to date has been in the areas of strategy formulation, greater participation and information exchange, but many familiar strategy implementation constraints still remain. The actual application of the integrated sustainable development approach at the field level is a gradual and evolving process. The integration of environment and development is not necessarily straightforward in practice, and the process has been slow. The prospect still exists of an overproduction of strategies, plans, policies and technical designs and an undersupply of the skills, resources, institutions and public demands needed to implement them.

30. What is lacking in many countries are the structures and capacities to carry out many of the technical functions associated with environmental management such as natural resources monitoring, environmental impact assessment, pollution regulation and other more technical activities. These, in turn, require the strengthening of ministries and agencies such as those in the areas of agriculture and forestry, the reshaping of training curricula, the creation of new institutes, civil service pay reform and the modification of laws and regulatory frameworks. Some progress has been made in these areas such as the establishment by the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) in cooperation with UNEP of eight national cleaner production centres (see report of the Secretary-General on chapter 34 (E/CN.17/1996/2/Add.24)), but major gaps in capacity exist at this level. The work of putting such technical, scientific and institutional structures in place represents the long-term challenge facing many countries.

31. Over the longer term, countries will need to develop the ability to learn and institutionalize new roles and new performance standards with respect to sustainable development. Capacity-building in this context will likely entail more far-reaching organizational, social and even political reforms. Of critical importance will be two factors: first, the enhancement of the role of groups outside government such as non-governmental organizations and the private sector; and second, the shift to a more cross-sectoral approach to the design and implementation of sustainable development. As expected, this shift is proving to be one of the most difficult to achieve given the embedded patterns of behaviour in Governments, donors, professional groups and other participants. Finally, funding mechanisms will need to become more responsive to the evolutionary nature of capacity-building and to be structured less on the "start-stop" basis associated with conventional project financing.

32. Ways and means to mobilize locally available financial resources, including from the private sector, should be explored. Strengthening public-private partnerships is one way to mobilize such resources. Sectoral agencies should include the economic and finance authorities of countries in their dialogues on financial mobilization.

V. EMERGING PRIORITIES

33. The evidence now seems overwhelming that donor- and supply-driven technical assistance has little sustainable impact. The trend towards programme designs that are flexible, learning-oriented and based on national ownership, commitment and energy needs to be accelerated. Donors still have too few full-time staff who specialize in institutional and capacity programming. All the participants, including the donors, must focus more systematically on overcoming the challenges inherent in capacity-building programmes, so as to sustain the progress made so far.

34. Specific attention needs to be paid to operational questions and to making the connection between the broader strategic aspects of capacity-building and their operational implications. There is a growing interest in many countries in getting rapid access to best operational practice in capacity-building. Donors can do much to fill this need for collaborative learning by organizing themselves so as to capture and disseminate their own experience. More support for institutional and professional evaluations, compilations of best practice, needs assessments and training programmes will be needed. Assistance with the establishment of networks is one option. Another is the support of forums that bring practitioners together. DAC (OECD) sponsored a workshop in Rome in December 1996 on best practices in capacity-building in environment within the context of sustainable development. This type of initiative might be replicated on a wider scale in other areas, as well as at the regional level.

35. National sustainable development strategies are an important mechanism for enhancing and linking national capacity, in terms of their bringing together all aspects of sustainability as well as all the actors concerned. The Bretton Woods institutions - the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) - and the United Nations system should work together in capacity-building on sustainable development strategies and their implementation. The work in

respect of the Inter-Agency Task Force on Sustainable Development (IACSD) strategies needs to be intensified. Support to UNDP's Capacity 21 programme should be complemented with support at both the national and the regional levels. Broader involvement of other United Nations organizations in the further development and implementation of the programme is desirable. The scope of the programme must address all elements of sustainable development. Capacity-building efforts should not stop after sustainable development strategies have been formulated, since the implementation of such strategies requires continuous support and motivation at the regional level.

36. In view of the rapidly increasing responsibilities of local authorities going along with decentralization processes, it is very important to develop properly designed and user-friendly training materials for local leaders. The current focus of capacity-building is still too much on professionals, and too little on local leaders, councillors and others. This gap in capacity often leads to a communication breakdown on issues related to environmental sustainability, which in itself is a major hindrance to progress in sustainable local development policies and practices.

37. A number of submissions that contributed to this report had suggested that some efforts should be made by field practitioners to review the implementation of Agenda 21 five years after the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development. In some cases, this kind of retrospective activity is already taking place. For example, the Earth Council in cooperation with a number of African non-governmental organization networks is planning a series of three workshops in collaboration with African non-governmental organization networks including NESDA. Such forums should also include some attention to capacity-building, given its central importance.

Notes

[1] Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, vol. I, Resolutions Adopted by the Conference (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.93.I.8 and corrigendum), resolution 1, annex II.